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Trump Administration

Massive Layoffs at the Department of Education Erode Its Civil Rights Division

Only five of the agency's civil rights offices remain nationwide. Those who are still with the department say it will now be "virtually impossible" to resolve discrimination complaints.



People protest President Donald Trump's plans to dismantle the Department of Education outside the agency in Washington on Tuesday. Eric Lee/The New York Times/Redux

by Jodi S. Cohen and Jennifer Smith Richards

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With a mass email sharing what it called "difficult news," the U.S. Department of Education has eroded one of its own key duties, abolishing more than half of the offices that investigate civil rights complaints from students and their families.

Civil rights complaints in schools and colleges largely have been investigated through a dozen regional outposts across the country. Now there will be five.

The Office for Civil Rights' locations in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, New York, Philadelphia and San Francisco are being shuttered, ProPublica has learned. Offices will remain in Atlanta, Denver, Kansas City, Seattle and Washington, D.C.

The OCR is one of the federal government's largest enforcers of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, investigating thousands of allegations of discrimination each year. That includes discrimination based on disability, race and gender.

"This is devastating for American education and our students. This will strip students of equitable education, place our most vulnerable at great risk and set back educational success that for many will last their lifetimes," said Katie Dullum, an OCR deputy director who resigned last Friday. "The impact will be felt well beyond this transitional period."

The Education Department has not responded to ProPublica's requests for comment.

In all, about 1,300 of the Education Department's approximately 4,000 employees were told Tuesday through the mass emails that they would be laid off and placed on administrative leave starting March 21, with their final day of employment on June 9.

The civil rights division had about 550 employees and was among the most heavily affected by Tuesday's layoffs, which with other departures will leave the Education Department at roughly half its size.

At least 243 union-represented employees of the OCR were laid off. The Federal Student Aid division, which administers grants and loans to college students, had 326 union-represented employees laid off, the most of any division.

On average, each OCR attorney who investigates complaints is assigned about 60 cases at a time. Complaints, which have been backlogged for years, piled up even more after President Donald Trump took office in January and <u>implemented a monthlong freeze on the agency's civil rights work</u>.

Catherine Lhamon, who oversaw the OCR under former Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden said: "What you've got left is a shell that can't function."

Civil rights investigators who remain said it now will be "virtually impossible" to resolve discrimination complaints.

"Part of OCR's work is to physically go to places. As part of the investigation, we go to schools, we look at the playground, we see if it's accessible," said a senior attorney for OCR, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not laid off and fears retaliation. "We show up and look at softball and baseball fields. We measure the bathroom to make sure it's accessible. We interview student groups. It requires inperson work. That is part of the basis of having regional offices. Now, California has no regional office."

The OCR was investigating about 12,000 complaints when Trump took office. The largest share of pending complaints — about 6,000 — were related to students with disabilities who feel they've been mistreated or unfairly denied help at school, according to a ProPublica analysis of department data.

Since Trump took office, the focus has shifted. The office has opened an unusually high number of "directed investigations," based on Trump's priorities, that it began without receiving complaints. These relate to curbing antisemitism, ending participation of transgender athletes in women's sports and combating alleged discrimination against white students.

Traditionally, students and families turn to the OCR after they feel their concerns have not been addressed by their school districts. The process is free, which means families that can't afford a lawyer to pursue a lawsuit may still be able to seek help.

When the OCR finds evidence of discrimination, it can force a school district or college to change its policies or require that they provide services to a student, such as access to disabilities services or increased safety at school. Sometimes, the office monitors institutions to make sure they comply.

"OCR simply will not be investigating violations any more. It is not going to happen. They will not have the staff for it," said another attorney for the Department of Education, who also asked not to be named because he is still working there. "It was extremely time and labor intensive."

The department said in a press release that all divisions at the department were affected. The National Center for Education Statistics, which collects data about the health of the nation's schools, was all but wiped away.

Education Secretary Linda McMahon called the layoffs "a significant step toward restoring the greatness of the United States education system." In addition to the 1,300 let go on Tuesday, 600 employees already had accepted voluntary resignations or had retired in the past seven weeks, according to the department.

Trump and his conservative allies have long wanted to shut the department, with Trump calling it a "big con job." But the president hasn't previously tried to do so, and officially closing the department would require congressional approval.

Instead, Trump is significantly weakening the agency. The same day Congress confirmed McMahon as education secretary, she sent department staff an email describing a "final mission" — to participate in "our opportunity to perform one final, unforgettable public service" by eliminating what she called "bloat" at the department "quickly and responsibly."

Education Department employees received an email on Tuesday afternoon saying all agency offices across the country would close at 6 p.m. for "security reasons" and would remain closed Wednesday. That led many workers to speculate that layoffs were coming.

Then, after the workday had ended, employees who were being laid off began receiving emails that acknowledged "the difficult workforce restructuring."

What We're Watching

During Donald Trump's second presidency, ProPublica will focus on the areas most in need of scrutiny. Here are some of the issues our reporters will be watching — and how to get in touch with them securely.



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Sharon Lerner

I cover health and the environment and the agencies that govern them, including the Environmental Protection Agency.



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Robert Faturechi

I have been reporting on Trump
Media, the parent company of
Truth Social. I'm also reporting on
the Trump administration's trade policies,
including tariffs.

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Andy Kroll

I cover justice and the rule of law, with a focus on the Justice
Department, the U.S. Attorney's
Office for the District of Columbia and the federal courts.

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Jesse Coburn

I'm tracking how the Trump administration reshapes policy at the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation.

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Jodi S. Cohen X

Jodi S. Cohen is a senior editor for ProPublica.

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Tips about government and business, particularly in the Midwest, are welcome. I'm also eager to hear from educators and government officials. I want to connect with parents and students experiencing the administration's policy changes.